The story of Prince Sangada: a mon legend in Southeast Asian context

Jenny, Mathias

7

The Story of Prince Saṅgadā: A Mon Legend in Southeast Asian Context

Mathias Jenny[1]

> I will arrange glorious words, like pearls on a necklace, according to the rules of poetry. I will tell a story that happened in the land of the Mon. In the country of the Haṁsā Swan it appeared, the story of Saṅgadā it is called. This book was written before, composed in verses long time ago. Because much time has since passed the verses have become incomplete, the language distorted. I will therefore write the poem again, in perfect verses and in new words. (Saṅgadā: 1) [2]

Background

There is a long tradition of written and oral literature in Mon and other Southeast Asian communities, encompassing different genres of texts and mixing indigenous with Indian and other imported material. Among the most important of these are the Buddhist Jātaka tales of the Buddha's former lives. These Jātakas, translations and

---

[1] I am indebted to the many Mon who helped me in working through the text and gave me invaluable background information, both in Thailand and Burma.

[2] All references to the text are made to an unpublished manuscript of 79 pages which combines the available printed versions of Saṅgadā (Kalyāṇa 1999, Mem Ong 1999) and which is the basis for further investigation.

adaptations from the Pali commentaries, are written in prose and read out or recited by monks on important Buddhist holy days. The Jātaka tales follow a fixed pattern, with the Buddha telling a story of one of his former lives and then explaining which of the protagonists is who in the present audience of monks. Another important category of literature comprises historical texts such as the famous *Rājādhirāj* and the story of Queen *Mi Cau Bu* and her foster son King *Dhammacetī*. Legends about the origins of towns and temples abound in Monland, usually going back to a legendary prophecy of Buddha and the subsequent building of the place. The line separating myth from history is notoriously vague in Southeast Asia and many of these legends are taken to be "real history," not only by lay people but also by local scholars.[3]The text to be presented in this paper, "The story of Prince Saṅgadā" is considered by Mon to be a *wɛ̀ŋ* or "historical text," reporting true events that happened in Monland, albeit of a different quality from Rājādhirāj and other chronicles, which are usually written in prose. The story reminds one rather of a European-style fairy tale, combining quasi historical events with folk mythology and moral instructions, and ending with an overall moral lesson that "doing good will bring about good results for oneself." This kind of story is still widely recited in Mon areas especially in Burma, less so in Thailand, where modern technology has taken over the place of traditional entertainment to a large degree. The main occasions for folktales or legends like Saṅgadā to be performed are different merit-making ceremonies at home, less in temples, as the story is not considered religious, in spite of its moral component and in spite of the hero being referred to as a *bodhisatta* or Buddha-to-be. A senior member of the household or of the community would read out the whole story or parts of it to his audience. This can take the whole night to finish. Theatre performances (*puə càt* in Mon) of Saṅgadā may be seen, but are rather rare.

While the story of Saṅgadā is similar in style to such Indian based legends as *Mi Ḍoṅ Keh Sran* and *Mi Ḍoṅ Keh Thaw*, and to the poetic romance *Kon Phen Kon Jhaṅ*, a Mon adaptation of the Thai classic *Khŭn Cháaŋ Khuŭn Phɛ̆n*, it is different from these in that the author clearly states that this story reports historical events in Monland. Most other folktales are set in an obviously Indian context or, as in the case of *Kon Phen Kon Jhaṅ*, identified as a story set in *Dyūdyā* (Ayudhya, Siam). The storyline of Saṅgadā is also known, with some variation, among the Thai and Lao,[4] where the hero, and the story, is called *Săŋ Sĭnchay*. I am not aware of a corresponding Burmese version, nor have I found Buddhist or Indian sources of the story.

In the present study I will give a short summary and description of the plot and its different levels of content before briefly comparing the setting and characters of the

---

[3] See for example Aung-Thwin (1998: ch. 1) for a reassessment of historiography in Burma.

[4] The Lao version available to me is written in Thai characters in Isaan-Lao language (Chongrian, undated). The text is said to have been composed by Thao Pangkham in 1650 at Nong Bualamphu in Northeast Thailand. Other Lao versions exist and were published in Laos, but are not easily available outside Laos. All references to Lao version are to the Isaan text.

story with the corresponding versions in Thai and Lao. The second part of the paper is dedicated to the analysis of the language used in the text, focusing on vocabulary and morphosyntactic features, as well as rhyme patterns.

The Story of Prince Saṅgadā: Summary of the Plot

King Seṇāgutta, ruler of the Land of Velukaccā, loses his younger sister Pāladevī to the ghost Akāy Bala when she reaches the age of sixteen. Pāladevī is abducted by the ghost and taken to his home, which lies beyond seven rivers and eight ravines. She becomes his queen and gives birth to a daughter, Devīyakkhā. The ghost Akāy Bala later loses their daughter to the Nāga King in gambling when she is seven years old.

King Seṇāgutta is desperate at the loss of his sister. He abandons the throne and becomes an ascetic in the forest. After many months he meets seven beautiful young maidens at a water pond. He approaches them and asks them about their home and parents. After learning that they are the daughters of poor farmers, he asks them to become his consorts and takes them back to the palace. The six older sisters soon give birth to sons, one each, but the youngest sister, Devīpadma, remains childless. Finally she too becomes pregnant, at the same time as her lady-in-waiting, and they both give birth to very special sons. Devīpadma's son is born riding on a conch shell and carrying an ivory bow, the signs of a person of great merit and power. He is given the name Saṅgadā. The servant's son, who is born on the same day, is a lion.

When the six older sisters learn of the birth of their supernatural nephew and the lion-child, they become jealous. Afraid that their sons might lose the throne to their youngest brother, they persuade the king to expel the new-born children together with their mothers from the palace, as their abnormal appearance surely is a bad omen for the king. The mothers and their children have to leave the town and go to live in the forest, where Indra builds them a palace and sends gods in the shape of children to be playmates of Saṅgadā and the lion-boy. Saṅgadā grows up, learning various superhuman skills from the gods and becomes an invincible young man, while his brothers turn into selfish good-for-nothings in their father's palace.

While the king is happy with his family, he cannot forget his sister. When his sons become of age, he asks them to go and get her back from the ghost Akāy Bala. As the six brothers do not have the skills nor the courage for such an undertaking, they go and find out the whereabouts of Saṅgadā and tell him that the king asked them to go and bring back their aunt Pāladevī. Saṅgadā believes that it is his father's wish and joins his brothers. While they stay at the bank of a wide river marking the border of the ghost's land, Saṅgadā reaches Akāy Bala's palace and after many fights with ghosts and ogres manages to bring back his aunt and her daughter, whom he wins back from the Nāga King in a game.

On their way back to Velukaccā the six older brothers trick Saṅgadā into taking a walk in the forest. Leaving behind his magic bow and the lion-boy with Pāladevī and her daughter, he follows them into the forest. The six older brothers throw Saṅgadā

into a deep well in the middle of the jungle, afraid that their father will find out that Saṅgadā was the real hero of the expedition. They go back to their aunt and cousin and tell them that Saṅgadā had a fight with a powerful ghost and lost. The ghost took him away and they could not follow them. Pāladevī does not believe the boys, but has no other option than to follow them back to Velukaccā. Before leaving the place she makes a vow, leaving behind her hairpiece and scarf. "If my dear nephew is still alive, I will get this hairpiece and scarp back some day," she said.

Soon after returning to Velukaccā, where they are warmly welcomed by King Seṇāgutta and his six consorts, a merchant who had found the hairpiece and scarp brings them as gifts to the king, who in turn gives them to his sister. Pāladevī immediately recognizes her belongings and is sure that Saṅgadā is still alive. She informs the king, but he does not believe her.

Saṅgadā is trapped in the well for seven days before god Indra comes to rescue him and brings him back to his mother. Pāladevī finally finds her nephew in the palace in the forest and together with Devīpadma he is brought back to Velukaccā. The six older sisters and their sons receive their well deserved punishment. Saṅgadā marries his cousin Devīyakkhā and rules in his father's stead in Velukaccā.

Components of the Narrative

The story of Saṅgadā contains different elements or layers of narrative, which I will discuss briefly in the following sections. The quasi historical and mythological elements are used to set the frame, so that the audience can more easily relate to the events.

History

As mentioned above, Saṅgadā is presented as a historical text of Monland. Which parts can be considered historical? After the opening verses, a description of the city of Velukaccā is given:

> There was a town, a big land, prosperous and grand. Velukaccā was its name. Woodcarvings adorned the houses, and windows of fine gold. The palace was decorated with gemstones, a truly noble place. A crystal cave was there, shining like the sun. The palace in the park was made of gold, surrounded by white elephants, pure like jasmine bloom. The buildings were all arranged in perfect order. Light-footed horses trotted daringly and straight. Soldiers carrying lances and swords stood lined up on every side of the city wall. Many tongues were spoken, all languages were heard, the place was filled with Chinese and Haw, Siamese, Mon, and Burmese, Indian, Chin, and Parsi. Wells and ponds were abundant in all quarters of the city. The wall was lined with watchtowers and suites, the moats and ponds were like golden altars. It looked like Lord Indra's Tāvatiṁsa heaven. (Saṅgadā, pp. 2f)

According to common usage in Mon and other Southeast Asian histories, place names are given in Pali rather than in the vernacular. There is no known connection of the legendary Velukaccā with any historical site in Lower Burma (the old Rehmonya or Monland). A possible trace might be a place known as *ɗɤŋ sɛŋhətèə* ("Town of Saṅgadā") near Ko' Dot in Ye Township, Mon State. Folk legend has it that there used to be a town where today only a small forested hill stands in the middle of flooded rice fields. A small temple on top of the hill is of newer date, as is the Mon inscription on a stone slab found there. In a short interview in 2002, the abbot of the temple said that this was the place where "our Lord Buddha, in his life as Saṅgadā, came to live with his mother when his father banished him from the palace," i.e. the palace built by Indra for the refugees from Velukaccā according to the narrative. Rather than pointing to real historical facts in the story, the presence of *ɗɤŋ sɛŋhətèə* and the legend about its origin indicate the antiquity and importance of the Saṅgadā legend in Monland. An unknown number of historical sites probably still lie hidden under the ground of Lower Burma and invite local people to attach their own legends to their sometimes visible ruins.

One interesting aspect of the description of Velukaccā is the different peoples and languages mentioned as spoken on the streets, taken as an indication of the prosperity and grandeur of the place. Chinese and Haw (Yunnanese) merchants were common in all Southeast Asian towns since the Middle Ages and probably earlier. They came by sea or by land with caravans from Yunnan through the Shan States. The word *sem* in Mon can mean both Thai (Siamese) or the related Shan. It is not clear which of the two is intended here. The Siamese are the more commercially and politically powerful people during most of recorded history of Southeast Asia, but strong Shan influence can be seen after the collapse of Pagán in Upper Burma and may well have extended to Lower Burma and Monland. Burmese and Mon have been living together for centuries, both in war and in peace, as they still do today in many villages and towns in Lower Burma. Indian merchants were among the earliest to trade with Southeast Asia and still make up a significant part of the population in Monland. Parsi or Persians were among the most active traders in medieval Southeast Asia.[5] More surprising is the mention of Chin, whose homeland is in north-western Burma and who are not known to have had connections with Lower Burma in historical times (Luce, 1985: 77–88). Equally unexpected is the lack of mention of Karen, century long neighbors of the Mon and important protagonists in many other quasi historical legends, such as the "history" of Kyaik Htiyo (Palita, 1997).

In summary, Saṅgadā does not give any hints of being real history, but at least the description of the town of Velukaccā and its king (or rather local ruler) Seṇāgutta paints a plausible picture of a multiracial and multilingual, decentralized society as

[5] See Lieberman (2003: chs. 2, 3) for a comprehensive assessment of the commercial and cultural history of western and central Southeast Asia.

was commonplace in pre-colonial Southeast Asia before the creation of nation states. The fact that the story is not dated does not increase its historical value, of course, but the role and value of "real" history in traditional Southeast Asia is very different from the modern western world.

Folk Mythology

While the historical information to be gained from Saṅgadā is meager at best, the mythological side appears more promising.

The recurring number seven is as ubiquitous in the Indian cultural sphere as it is in western mythology. According to Indian tradition, the world is made up of seven continents ringed by seven seas, with Mount Meru, the abode of the gods, in the centre. In the story of Saṅgadā, the number seven appears first as the number of rivers that have to be crossed to reach the home of Akāy Bala, the ghost who abducts Pāladevī. Their daughter is taken away by the Nāga King at the age of seven. When King Seṇāgutta lives as a hermit in the forest, he meets seven young maidens, which he takes home as his queens after seven days. When the older sisters' sons reach the age of seven, the youngest sister becomes pregnant with Saṅgadā. When he reaches the age of seven, his brothers ask him to go with them to rescue their aunt. When Saṅgadā fight with Akāy Bala, he kills the ghost seven times and seven times he comes back to life with seven bodies. Finally, when Prince Saṅgadā is pushed into the well by his brothers he has to wait seven days before Indra comes to rescue him.

Another recurring topic in folk literature is the relationship between man, ghosts, and Nāgas. According to the Mon version, Akāy Bala is a ghost, while both the Thai and the Lao texts have a *Yakkha* (ogre) called *Kumbhaṇḍa*. The fight between man and ogres is already depicted in the classic Indian epos *Rāmayaṇa* and recurs in many legends and stories. Ghost, *kalok* in Mon, is often used as a cover term for superhuman beings. Shorto (1971: 39) defines the Old Mon *kindok* as a "Daemon inferior to gods and superior to men, *in Buddhist contexts equated with Yakkha*." In modern Mon the meaning is given as "Spirit, daemon, *nat, esp.* one attached to a family or to a group of families" (Shorto, 1962: 74).[6] Although the modern meaning does not usually cover Yakkhas, that the Mon text here intends this meaning is confirmed by the name of the Pāladevī's daughter with Akāy Bala, viz. Devīyakkhā. The use of indigenous terms for Indian mythological figures is an indication of the antiquity of a text, as described for Thai by Chit Bhumisak (2004), but here the usage is rather atypical as all personal and place names are purely Indic, with the possible exception of Akāy Bala.

The ghost Akāy Bala loses his daughter in a game of dice to the king of the Nāgas. The Nāgas, although also with Indian connections, are seen as a symbol of indigenous Southeast Asian peoples. According to Sujit Wongthes (2003: 4ff) Nāgas symbolize: 1. old populations with pre-Indic, pre-Buddhist cultures and belief systems who

[6] See also Shorto (1967) for a more detailed account of Mon *kalok*.

migrated south from Yunnan into the Maekhong valley; 2. lords of the earth and of the water who were venerated in the shape of snakes already in prehistoric times; and 3. creator gods of indigenous peoples in the Mekong valley, which are seen as creators of rivers, ponds, and mountains. With the arrival of Buddhism the Nāga cults were integrated in the new religion and survived in many legends among the peoples of Southeast Asia.

The legend of Saṅgadā incorporates these old beliefs, as do many other folktales of the region. The humans, although nominally inferior to both Yakkhas and Nāgas, win in the end through the assistance of the Hindu god Indra. This victory of man together with Indra over the Nāgas and Yakkhas can be seen as symbolic for the supremacy of the people who have adopted Indian culture and religion over the indigenous population, an ever recurring theme in folk literature.

A prominent role is played by the astrologer, who is consulted by the king whenever important decisions are to be made. King Seṇāgutta learns from the court astrologer that his younger sister will be abducted. It is also the astrologer who advises the king on how to protect her. Later the six older queens pay the astrologer to make a false prophecy to the king about his youngest son. The king believes his words and banishes the new-born babies and their mothers into the forest. The importance and influence of astrologers and fortune tellers is still part of modern Southeast Asian societies and politics.

Buddhist Teaching

Although Saṅgadā is not a Buddhist tale in the strict sense and has many archaic traits, the narrative is interspersed with Buddhist moral explanations and teachings. Moral education is actually one of the two main purposes of this kind of literature, the other one being entertainment of the audience, to be described in the next section.

Buddhism, especially the Theravāda tradition, is a very text-oriented, abstract construct and rather difficult to understand for lay people. Popular stories therefore play an important role in religious education. The law of *kamma* or results of previous deeds is elaborately treated in the Buddhist scriptures, especially in the non-canonical Jātaka tales, which are very popular in Buddhist societies. Apart from the 550 official Jātakas, many popular adaptations are found in Southeast Asia. The epic poem of Saṅgadā makes use of some stylistic elements of the Jātakas, especially flashbacks to previous lives of the protagonists, explaining their present struggle. Unlike real Jātakas, though, these flashbacks occur throughout the story. I will give here only two examples as illustration.

When Queen Devīpadma learns that she has to leave the palace together with her servant and the new-born children, she grieves and laments, but King Seṇāgutta does not change his mind. That she is separated from the man she loves is explained in the following verses:

> It is as it must be, according to the fruit of merit and sin. This queen and king, listen well, they had to endure the fruits of their former lives. Did they not separate doves, didn't they set up traps? Didn't they tear fearful birds apart from each other? Didn't they speak untrue words in order to disunite and destroy others' friendship? Didn't they trade in dogs and pigs, selling them in many different places so that they had to part from each other? Their former deed now indeed came back to them. The queen and king had to part sorrowfully. (Saṅgadā: 19)

As the king and the queen are guilty of *musāvādā* or "bad speech" which led to other quarrelling and breaking up, and of *micchājīva* or "bad livelihood," trading in animals, separating them from their mates and families, they have to endure others doing the same things to them.

Another scene showing the results of past deeds is when Saṅgadā is pushed into the well and has to remain there for seven days without being able to climb out on his own. The reason for his bad "fortune" is given as old *kamma* again: In a past life Saṅgadā found a crab in the fields. He tried to catch it but the crab fled into its hole. Saṅgadā got some grass and closed the crab hole with it. The crab was caught in its hole for seven days before it was released. Again, as in the case of Queen Devīpadma and King Seṇāgutta, the former bad deeds are directly reflected in the present results.

Poetic Descriptions

Good literature in Mon is not only measured by its storyline and moral value, but not least by its "taste," i.e. the beauty of its language. As the author states in the opening stanzas, the story of Saṅgadā was written earlier, but the verses had become incomplete and distorted. Therefore he feels obliged to restore the story to its former beauty in complete and perfect verses. I will return to the rhyme patterns and verse forms below. Here I will give a few examples illustrating the poetic descriptions, which are abundant throughout the narrative. These poetic descriptions are not unique to Mon literature, but are common also in classical Thai texts, which are not complete without having lengthy sections of *chom pàa* (admiring the forest) or *chom dɔ̀ɔk-máay* (admiring flowers). Even some modern Thai authors sprinkle their novels with elaborate descriptions of the environment.[7] But it is not only material things that are graphically described, but also the (mostly sad) feelings of the protagonists as well as rather explicit bedroom scenes.

The following scene shows King Seṇāgutta's grieving after his sister is abducted by the ghost:

[7] One of the most famous of these is probably the northern Thai writer Mala Khamchan, who uses not only stylistic elements of classical poetry, but also folk mythology and belief in his novels. Mon literature is still waiting for modern writers of this kind.

> The king returned to his town, the king returned in distress. His tears flowed without pause, he struck his breast in anguish. "Ah, my little sister, apple of my eyes. Ah, my purest gold, my lotus flower. Ah, golden apple of my eyes. You have parted from me, I must wait in sorrow. I must endure the pain, suffer the distress. I must bear my anguish, because of my shame. I must wither away, I am to lose my strength. How much I cared for you, now I am lost, my thoughts are ended." Thus did the righteous king mourn and weep. (Saṅgadā: 4f)

When Seṇāgutta returns to Velukaccā with the seven maidens, the atmosphere is described as follows:

> All roads and marketplaces were decorated with golden umbrellas and golden flags were swaying in the breeze. The air was fragrant with perfume, all the roads were lined with golden umbrellas and flags, decorated with plantains, longan trees and sugar palms. Charioteers were brought in parade, riders of swift Sindh horses, and soldiers on elephants' backs with golden reins. Soldiers on heavenly horses were moving in line; the warriors were well decorated with ornaments of different kinds. They marched in two shining lines, as if joined by yokes. The foot soldiers came in an endless orderly line without quivering. Swords of gold and silver were to be seen everywhere in great numbers, as well as drums of skin and drums of brass of all shapes. Bamboo organs and cymbals were playing, together with trumpets and clarinets, flutes and piccolos, by groups of young men. Crocodile harps and violins they played and the people clapped their hands. The sound of drums echoed from all sides in a big rumble. Chinese drums and Haw drums, golden drums of the Indians, Siamese drums and drums of the Chinese, two-faced Mon drums and Kre[8] drums resounded. When first the Mon drums sounded, the people proudly lifted up their hands and started to shout to the sound of many kinds of conch shells. (Saṅgadā: 8)

These descriptive sections do not advance the story, but they are important in adding color and depth to the scenes described.

Thai and Lao Versions

The main storyline is identical in the Mon, Thai, and Lao versions of Saṅgadā/Săŋ Sĭnchay. The Thai text exists in three versions: an older poem called *klɔɔn sùət* or "prayer poem," and two theatre plays, including one composed by King Rama II. The latter is the only version widely known in Thailand. Only the *klɔɔn sùət*, which is not easy to find in print these days, relates the complete story line. The two plays cover only the most popular episodes of the plot. The Lao version is composed in non-rhyming verses which use the alternation of heavy and light syllables as well as certain tone patterns as the main means of versification. According to Chit Bhumisak (2004)

[8] It is not clear what the word *kre* ‹krew› means here. Could it be a misspelling for ‹kareṅ› "Karen," which in Mon writing looks very similar?

this is the original technique of Tai poetry, also found in the Lao epic *Tháaw Hûŋ Tháaw Cuəŋ*.

While the Thai and Lao versions agree in most personal names, differing from the Mon text, many details of the plot are shared by the Thai and Mon but not the Lao versions. Interestingly all personal and place names are Pali/Sanskrit. All three versions are composed in indigenous verse patterns, with the Mon and especially the Lao versions exhibiting some archaic traits. As this kind of story is not composed once by a single author but rather retold and rewritten over centuries, there is no point in asking who borrowed from whom.[9] The Thai text clearly positions itself between Mon and Lao, which may be an indication of influence from both of them. While Thai tradition sees the story as an ancient Lao tale, the *klɔɔn sùət* (and only it) states in the opening that this is an old tale of the Mon country. The Thai *klɔɔn sùət* and the Lao texts are the most extensive. The plot seems to be an ancient folk tale common to many peoples of the area, intermingled with Indian mythology and political history. The latter is especially apparent in the Lao text, which has references to real historical places such as Campā, while in Mon there are some quasi-historical allusions, which belong to the realm of legends rather than history. The Thai versions seem to be free from historical and political elements. Some of the main differences in the storyline are summed up in the following table.

Table 7.1: Comparison of the Mon, Thai and Lao versions

Detail	*Mon*	*Thai*	*Lao*
City	Velukaccā	Păñcāl	Peṅcāl
Hero	Saṅgadā	Saṅkh Śilpjay	Saṅkh Silpjay
Father of hero	King Seṇāgutta	King Senāguṭ, son of Kuśarāj	King Kusarāj
Mother of hero	Devīpadma	Pradum	Nāṅ Lun
Sister of king	Pāladevī	Kesarasumaṇḍā	Sumundā
Sister is abducted by	Akāy Bala, ghost	Kumbhaṇḍ, ogre	Kumband, ogre
King becomes	ascetic	Buddhist monk	Buddhist monk
Seven maidens are	poor farmers' daughters	poor farmers' daughters	princesses of Campā
Mother of lion-boy	servant, no name	servant, Kraisara	first queen of Kusarāj, Candā

[9] This does not exclude single versions being composed by specific authors, as is the case in the Lao and the two Thai theatre versions.

The Language of Saṅgadā

Saṅgadā is a folktale told in poetic language, a genre common among different peoples around the globe. Especially oral traditions rely on rhyme patterns which facilitate the performance and ensure a correct recital of the story.

Banti and Giannattasio (2004: 312ff) list some common genres of poetry. According to their typology, Saṅgadā can be considered an epic poem, which they define (quoting Newman) as

> long narrative poems that treat one or more heroic figures, and concerns historical, legendary, or mythical events that are central to the traditions and beliefs of a community. (Banti and Giannattasio, 2004: 312)

As Banti and Giannattasio (2004: 314) concede, their "eight groups of poetic genres are not exhaustive and, like most typologies, are clear in their central areas but may overlap." There are some elements that make Saṅgadā look like their category of religious poetry, especially the Buddhist karmic explanations given throughout the text, as well as like their category of lyric poetry in the parts describing the environment and the emotions of the protagonists.

Unlike ordinary spoken or written language (prose), poetic language has characteristic features that vary from one culture to the next. Most forms of poetry exhibit rhythmic patterns not normally found in prose, often combined with special prosodic and melodic patterns as well as different forms of rhyme found in many languages. But

> [p]oetic discourse differs from plain discourse in many traditions not only for its musical and/or metrical organization. Quite frequently, the language used for poetic texts is also characterized as a special register, beyond ordinary speech, by features such as (1) special morphology, (2) special syntax, (3) a special lexicon, as well as by (4) special stylistic features. (Banti and Giannattasio, 2004: 306)

Different reasons for the use of special linguistic devices can be given, among them the retention of old forms through oral tradition in fixed expressions as well as a deliberate mystification and intensification of the message, which is not easily understood by all hearers. I will look at these features in turn below, ending this section with a short description of the verse form used in Saṅgadā and the relevant rhyme patterns.

Morphology

Mon morphology has gone through drastic leveling since the Old Mon period (Jenny, 2005: 60–67). Formerly productive processes were lost probably before Middle Mon, and many of the productive affixes became homophonous in spoken Mon. Literary Mon retains many distinctions lost in the spoken language, but the productiveness of the affixes is doubtful. In newer publications, incorrect usage can often be observed. One case in point is the spelling ‹kamlon› for *kəlon* "work n.",

which should be written ‹kalon›. Both forms have the same pronunciation in spoken Mon and both are derived from the verbal root *klon*, "do," but the spelling with the ‹-m-› infix forming *nomen agentis* is correctly used only for "servant, attendant." Consistency or inconsistency of this kind is not very telling in the analysis of a piece of literature, as the texts are copied and recopied frequently. The spelling therefore often reflects the orthographic preferences of the copyist rather than the original form.

One important morphological device in Old and Middle Mon is the verbal prefix ‹s-› indicating hypothetical, unrealistic, or future events (Jenny, 2005: 61ff for a summary of analyses). This affix is lost without trace in spoken Mon but still widely used in the literary language. Especially in classical texts (such as Acā Hwo's Jātaka tales) its use is still consistent with Middle Mon usage, but modern publications often add orthographic ‹s-› for purely aesthetic reasons. Throughout Saṅgadā, the use of ‹s-› is rare but where it occurs its use appears to correspond to the "correct" or original function of the affix, although its modern competitor, in some functions at least, viz. ‹roṅ› *roŋ/noŋ* occurs with equal frequency in the text. Probably at least parts of the narrative (and its form) go back to a time when the prefix was still functional and therefore meaningful.

Old and Middle Mon had a nominalizing device for verbs beginning with a single consonant by inserting a ‹-w-› infix. This process is not productive anymore and the forms that can still be found in modern Mon are best considered separate lexemes, such as ‹pwa› *pəwaʔ* "deed, act, fact" from ‹pa› *paʔ* "do" and ‹cwa, swa› *hwaʔ* "food, curry" from ‹ca› *ɛiəʔ* "eat." Apart from the common forms still found in the modern language such as ‹kwat› *kwɔt* "skill" from ‹kat› *kɔt* "to practice," there are a few nominalizations of this kind in the text which are not found in the modern language anymore. One example is ‹dwaḥ› *gwɛ̀h* from ‹daḥ› *tɛ̀h* "be hit, hit" in the sentence

(1) ယ္ဝံသီ ပ္ဍိအာစ္ဍိပ်အကြာဒ္ဒး။

yɤ̀ʔ	*spə*	*poy*	*ʔa*	*cɒp*	*ʔəkra*	*gwɛ̀h*
oh	aunt	1p	go	arrive	between	NML:hit

"Dear aunt we went [into the forest] and encountered [great danger]," lit. "we arrived among something hitting/the state of being hit." (Saṅgadā: 58)

The form ‹dwaḥ› does not appear in older texts in this meaning and might be an *ad hoc* formation by the composer, thus indicating the productivity of the nominalization process in the time when (this part of) the epic was composed.

The main derivational device of the Mon language, viz. compounding (both verbal and nominal), is still productive in the spoken language and thus not indicative of a special style. The general morphological picture of Saṅgadā is that of a partly archaic stage of modern Mon, not really different from older literary texts in prose.

Syntax

Despite the lack of morphological means to mark grammatical and syntactic relations, the syntax of Mon is rather flexible. The natural, unmarked order of constituents in a sentence is subject-verb-object, SVO, with modifiers following the modified. The constituent order may be reversed for discourse pragmatic reasons such as topicalization and focusing. Unlike Thai and Burmese, Mon makes only sparing use of classifiers. Arguments can be omitted freely whenever the referents are given in the linguistic or extra-linguistic context. Operators marking aspect or aspectoid and other distinctions, predicate markers, markers of number and definiteness as well as illocutionary force operators are not obligatory in most contexts (Jenny, 2005: 137–60).

Given the restrictions imposed by versification rules on syllable count and rhyme patterns, it is not surprising that many sentences in the text appear in a syntactically distorted form. While elements which would normally occur in spoken discourse are frequently omitted in poems, other words are added for purely euphonic reasons. These are mostly synonymous repetitions and compounds and sentence particles with no well-defined meaning which are added for the purpose of achieving the required rhyme. One such particle is the frequent *kyèʔ* "stranded" with does not have any obvious function in clause final position apart from rhyming with other words ending in ‹-a› *-aʔ* or *-èʔ* as in (2).

(2) ဂးတဲ့ မိန်လဝ်ကောန်ရုပ်ထဝ်ဂျ ပဲ့သရေင်ထဝ်သတိုက်လဝ်မ။

kèʔ	*toə*	*mìn*	*lɔ̀*	*kon*	*rùp*	*thɔ*	*kyèʔ*
say	SEQ	hug	DEPOSIT	child	shape	gold	PART

dɔ̀ə	*səriəŋ*	*thɔ*	*sətoc*	*lɔ̀*	*mèʔ.*
LOC	cradle	gold	CAUS:sleep	DEPOSIT	father[10]

"Having said that she hugged her golden baby and laid him to sleep in the golden cradle." (Saṅgadā: 19)

Rather frequent are inversions of constituents, as in the following sentence:

(3) ဟုိတ်ဒေါ်ဇြဟာန်နူဌာန်ဇော့်ခြာ အဲဂျိုင်စံင်တူ အဲဂျိုင်ပူဆာ။

hʊt	*tèʔ*	*sèʔhàn*	*nù*	*than*	*hùə-khra,*	*ʔuə*	*klàŋ*	*cɔŋ-tao*,
reason	y.sibling	love	ABL	place	far-apart	1s	much	burn-burn

ʔuə	*klàŋ*	*paocha*
1s	much	anxious

"Because my beloved little sister is far away from my place I am very anxious and distressed." (Saṅgadā: 14)

[10] *mèʔ* means "father" but may be used to respectfully refer to any male person, here the son.

The same sentence in prose would most likely include *ma* "extent" with the stative verb *klàŋ* "be much," which is rarely used predicatively in spoken Mon, the attributive form *həlàŋ* being preferred in most contexts. Instead of the nominalized form of "love n.", *sɛ̀ʔhàn*, the basic verb *chan* "love v." would be used in attributive position. The order of the constituents would be reversed in natural discourse:

(4) အဲစံင်တူပူဆာတ္ဂာဂမ့ိုင် ဟ့ိုတ်နူဒေံဆာန် အဲဇ့ဲခြာနူဌာန်။

ʔuə	*cɔŋ-tao*	*paocha*	*ma*	*həlàŋ*	*hɒt*	*nù*
1s	burn-burn	anxious	extent	attr:much	reason	ABL

tèʔ	*chan*	*ʔuə*	*hùə-khra*	*nù*	*than.*
y.sibling	love	1s	far-apart	ABL	place

The special syntactic features found in Saṅgadā cannot be attributed to foreign (Burmese or Thai) influence, as is the case in other Mon texts, but should be seen as indigenous poetic register. It is these syntactic peculiarities combined with archaic and rare vocabulary items that make poems difficult to understand and interpret and give them the sacred feeling they convey to the audience.

Lexicon

The third area in which poetic discourse may be different from ordinary speech is the lexicon. Archaic words are more likely to survive in oral literature, handed down over generations with large parts of the text unchanged, than in ordinary speech.

From its very beginning as written language in the 6th or 7th century, Mon exhibits a large share of foreign loans alongside indigenous material. The most important donor languages in the early Old Mon period were Pali and Sanskrit, with Burmese loans drastically increasing in the 14th and 15th centuries. A number of words are believed to be old loans from Malay, while much research remains to be done on the influence from other languages such as Thai/Shan, Karen, and Khmer, among others.

The lexicon found in Saṅgadā shows the full range of indigenous and loan vocabulary found in other pieces of Mon literature, with a few words that are rarely or never found in other texts or in the spoken language. Words of Indian origin which are common also to the spoken modern language are ‹dhaw/dhar› *thɔ̀* "Dharma, law, nature" from Sanskrit and ‹kaṁ› *kɔm* "Karma, deed" from Pali. Others are less clear in their meaning and not found in modern Mon, e.g. ‹jāsay› *cɛ̀əsɔə*, which might be a rendering of Pali *ajjhāsaya* "intention, desire, wish, disposition" as in the expression *tèwətao mə hnòk cɛ̀əsɔə* "the gods with great intention/disposition."[11] The Burmese loan ‹ʔasaṁ› *ʔəsɔm* in Mon usually has the meaning "(royal) order, command," but in Saṅgadā it is sometimes used in the (original) Burmese meaning "sound, voice," as in the expression ‹ʔasaṁ sadda› *ʔəsɔm-sɔttɛ̀ʔ*, where it is combined with the Pali word for

[11] According to some Mon scholars *cɛ̀əsɔə* is a short form of *cɛ̀ə pəsɔə* "iron net," which does not make sense semantically in most contexts unless it has some forgotten metaphorical meaning.

"sound." Other Burmese loans occur which are rarely used in modern Mon, e.g. ‹cancā› *cənca* "consider, think about," from Burmese ‹cañḥcaḥ› *sʼìzà* "id."

Archaic indigenous words include ‹phī dwā› *phi kwèə* "be happy, enjoy" and the poorly understood ‹paṅən/pṅən› *pəŋɒn* in the expression ‹thaw paṅən› *thɔ pəŋɒn*. Most Mon consultants could not attach a meaning to this word. One stated that *pəŋɒn* is a kind of precious metal, less valuable than gold but more than silver, probably something similar to Thai *nâak*, an alloy of gold, silver and copper. The conspicuous absence of Thai loans or calques suggests that the Mon epic is not a translation from Thai but rather an original composition.

Style

Typical of poetic style are pleonastic compounds and semantically superfluous repetitions, along with extensive use of figurative metaphorical expressions. Such graphic expressions are especially frequent referring to beloved people. Throughout the narrative, words like ‹thaw takoṅ› *thɔ təkoŋ* "bar of gold" and ‹gaḍoṅ mat› *həɗoŋ mòt* "apple of the eye" are used for lovers, children, and relatives, especially in direct speech. Other expressions commonly used to refer to beloved people include gold, gemstones, flowers, candles, and "the crown of the (golden/flower) palace" for princes. The hero is variously called "master of the ivory bow," "master of the conch shell," or Bodhisatta, "Buddha-to-be." Places are described as being made of pure gold, gemstones, or flowers. City streets are lined with plantains and other plants. The greatness of the king's power is translated into lines of elephants and swift-footed horses, standing in perfect order and the king is called "master of the elephants," "master of the golden palace," or "crown of the people."

When it comes to private activities of the king and his queens, metaphors take over as direct wording would not be considered fit for a broad audience. There is talk of lotus buds and lotus petals, lotus stems, and clear ponds of pure water. Allusions are made to Indra and Sujātā, the Indian god and his consort, to Rāma and Sītā, the hero and heroine of the Rāmayaṇa, without going into any details.

The special style of poetic language is made up of all elements mentioned above, in Mon most importantly syntactic patterns, some archaic lexicon and metaphors, along with frequent repetitions, which may be considered characteristic of oral literature.

The special style of poetic language is made up of all elements mentioned above, in Mon most importantly syntactic patterns, some archaic lexicon and metaphors, along with frequent repetitions, which may be considered characteristic of oral literature.

Versification Patterns

The last but not least important aspect of Saṅgadā is the rhyme patterns and versification rules of the epic. Mon poetry relies on similar rhymes on fixed positions within lines, half-lines, and stanzas. Different patterns are found in different genres (Vedañāṇa, 1997). The pattern used throughout Saṅgadā is based on stanzas of four

lines with eight syllables each, arranged in two half-lines. This verse form is similar to classical Burmese poetry and the Thai *klɔɔn sìi* ("four syllable verse"), but there are differences in rhyme patterns within the stanza. Although a stanza of 32 syllables is regarded to be a distinct unit, many incomplete stanzas of only two or three lines are found in the text, while in other cases there are long strings of continuing rhymes with no conceivable break. Often changes in line-end rhyme indicate a change of scene, while continuous rhyme is indicative of continuous narration.

Two reading styles may be applied in reciting epic poems of the kind of Saṅgadā, viz. *Kabya* and *Laṅkā*. The difference lies in the melody and rhythm. According to Luang Phi Mahe, abbot of Three Pagoda Pass Monastery, Laṅkā is more appropriate for the opening part of a poem, especially the homage to the Triple Gem, while Kabya reading is used for the main story. The performer is free up to some point to insert words for clarification of the meaning, resulting in an increase of reading speed or in a change of rhythm.

Unlike Lao poetry and at least some kinds of Thai poetry where the heaviness of a syllable is important, in Mon light syllables (unaccented presyllables) can either be neglected or counted as full syllables in versification. This is true even for the same word in different lines, depending on the required number of syllables, as can be seen in the case of *ləŋò* "pay respect" in the example below. While it is counted as disyllabic in the second line, in line 4 and others it is counted as monosyllabic. Alliteration, a common stylistic element in Thai poetry, is only of marginal importance in Mon.

The general rhyme pattern used in Saṅgadā is as follows.

1. The last syllable of the first half-line rhymes with the first, second or third syllable of the second half-line (<u>underlined</u> in the sample below).

2. The last syllables of all lines within a stanza (or section of the poem) rhyme with each other (**bold** in the sample below).

3. The last syllable of the last line in a section (rhyme group, not necessarily one stanza) rhymes with the last syllable of the first half-line of the new rhyme group (**<u>bold underlined</u>** in the sample below).

There is some freedom concerning the exact quality of the rhyming syllables. The distinction between vowels such as *o* and *ɔ*, *uə* and *ɔə, e* and ɛ is often neutralized. This may be seen as a dialectal feature, as many dialects do not distinguish these vowels (Diffloth, 1984; Jenny, 2005: 30ff). More interesting and revealing is the fact that rhymes are not sensitive to register differences. While in many cases register differences are merely a matter of different phonation (breathy voice vs. clear voice), in some cases they involve a change in the quality of the vowel. These differences arose with the devoicing and subsequent arising of registers, the exact time frame of which is still uncertain for Mon. It is probable that Mon devoiced rather late, maybe as late as the 15th or 16th century (Jenny, 2005: 26ff). Register differences and therefore

register-based differences in vowel qualities are not directly expressed in Mon orthography, which is mainly based on Middle Mon pronunciation. We therefore often find instances of "orthographic rhymes" in many pieces of Mon poetry, including Saṅgadā. As poetry in traditional Mon society is not something to be read in silence, this makes sense only if we assume that the corresponding verses were composed at a time when these rhymes were real, i.e. they were pronounced as audible rhymes. Yanson (2006: 117) writes about Burmese poetry that

> in old times there seems to have been no tradition of reciting poems. They were mostly or perhaps entirely intended for reading, and therefore *seeing* different finals would produce the impression of incorrect rhymes.

While these observations may be true for Burmese, they do not hold for Mon poetry, according to different Mon language consultants. This opinion is supported by the fact that homophonous words are allowed as rhymes even if their spelling is different, such as the emphatic particle ‹swaʔ› *sɒʔ* with the first syllable of ‹mboʔkət› *ɓɤ̀ʔkɒt* "crown," the archaic spelling of "Dharma," ‹dhar› *thɔ̀* with words ending in ‹aw› *ɔ* such as ‹law› *lɔ̀* "keep, deposit." There are, on the other hand, a few instances of orthographic rhymes involving the spelling ‹eṅ› which already in Middle Mon stood for two different pronunciations, *iəŋ* and *ɔŋ*, reflecting different Old Mon rhymes. This point requires an explanation, which I am unable to give at the present stage of research.

As an example of the rhyme pattern used in Saṅgadā, I give the opening verses in transliteration and a phonemic transcription of the reading pronunciation. Syllables in italics are unstressed and are not included in the syllable count.

Free translation:

> I am on my knees, my hands are raised. With all three doors I pay respect, my mind made clear, to the merits of the Lord of Life, with candles lit for the crown of man. I pay homage without ceasing, to the six kinds of teaching, the crown of mankind. I light the candles, according to the exalted qualities. Humbly I pay homage to the respected order of monks, with a clear heart, pure like a diamond. I turn away from lust and greed. I set my mind to paying homage, so that the Triple Gem may avert all hundreds and thousands of kinds of danger.
>
> May all danger subside and be extinguished, may the qualities of the Triple Gem arise and shine. This is my firm intention; I will pay homage without fail.
>
> I will arrange glorious words, like the pearls on a necklace, according to the rules of poetry. I will tell a story that happened in the land of the Mon. In the country of the Haṁsā Swan it appeared. (Saṅgadā: 1)

Mon		*Phonemic Transcription*		*Transliteration*	
ကွံင်ထံက်ကလိုဳ	တဲပင်ယိုဳသ္ဍိုတ်	*kəɓɔŋ* thɔk kə<u>lɒ</u>	tɔə pɛŋ <u>yɤ̀</u> ***sə*tɒt**	kḥɔ̀ thɔk kaləw	tay paṅ yəw stət
ဒ္ဍါပိလော့ဝ်	လယုင်လဝ်စိုတ်	kwɛ̀ə pɒə? lə<u>ŋɔ̀</u>	ləy<u>ɤ̀ŋ</u> <u>lɔ̀</u> **cɒt**	dwā pi lṅow	layuṅ law cət
ဂုန်ကျာ်ဂမျိုင်	ပွာန်တိုင်မျှံကိုတ်	kùn kyac kəm<u>yàŋ</u>	*pə*naŋ <u>taŋ</u> ɓɤ̀?**kɒt**	gun kyāk gamyəṅ	pnāṅ təṅ mboʔkət
အဲမလော့ဝ်ကွာ	ဟွံခြာတသိုတ်၊	ʔuə mə *lə*ŋ<u>ɔ̀</u> <u>kla</u>	hɤ̀? <u>khra</u> tə**sɒt**	ʔay ma lṅow klā	hwaʔ khrā tasət
ဂုန်ဓဝ်တြော်သွံ	ပလဝ်မျှံကိုတ်	kùn thɔ̀ trao <u>sɒ</u>ʔ	paʔ lɔ̀ ɓɤ̀?**kɒt**	gun dhaw trao swaʔ	pa law mboʔkət
တူကွေ့ဉ်စွံဖျုန်	တိုင်ဂုန်ပြသ္ဍိုတ်	tao *kə*niəŋ cɒʔ *phə*<u>ɗun</u>	taŋ <u>kùn</u> prɔə ***sə*tɒt**	tū kneṅ cwaʔ phḍun	təṅ gun pray stət
အဲဦက်လော့ဝ်ပ္ဍုင်	လယုင်လဝ်စိုတ်	ʔuə ɗoc *lə*ŋ<u>ɔ̀</u> *pə*<u>ɲɤŋ</u>	lə<u>yɤ̀ŋ</u> lɔ̀ **cɒt**	ʔay ḍik lṅow pñuṅ	layuṅ law cət
အရီယျသင်	ညံင်ဂမြင်ဗိုတ်၊	ʔərɒəyaʔ <u>sɛŋ</u>	ɲɔ̀ŋ kəm<u>rɛ̀ŋ</u> **pɤ̀t**	ʔarīyya saṅ	ñɔṅ gamraṅ bət
စ္ဍုန္ဓရာဂ	ကိလေသအိုတ်	*cə*ɗah nù rɛ̀ə<u>kɛ̀</u>ʔ	kɒəʔlɛ̀<u>sa</u>ʔ **ʔɒt**	cḍaḥ nū rāga	kilesa ʔət
အဲဦက်လော့ဝ်ဟော်င်	ပြေင်လဝ်စရိုတ်	ʔuə ɗoc *lə*ŋ<u>ɔ̀</u> <u>hiəŋ</u>	<u>priəŋ</u> lɔ̀ cə**rɒt**	ʔay ḍik lṅow heṅ	preṅ law carət
ဖိုအဲလော့ဝ်စိ	ရတ်ပိပြ်သ္ဍိုတ်	phɒ ʔuə *lə*ŋ<u>ɔ̀</u> <u>ci</u>ʔ	rɔ̀t pɒəʔ prɔə ***sə*tɒt**	phəw ʔay lṅow ci	rat pi pray stət
အန္တရဲဆက်စ့်	လှိုလက်ကိုတ်၊	ʔɔntərày <u>chɛk</u> cɔh	*lə*ŋ̀m l<u>ɛk</u> **kɒt**	ʔantarāy chak cah	lṅiṁ lak kət
ကိုလာ်လေင်အိုတ်	ကိုဟော်ပ္ဍိတ်ညိ	kɒ làɣ lɔ̀ŋ **<u>ʔɒt</u>**	kɒ hom <u>ɓ</u>lɒt ɲìʔ	kəw lāy leṅ ʔət	kəw hoṁ plət ñi
ပြလောန်အဆတ်	တိုင်ဂုန်ရတ်ပိ	prɔə lòn ʔə<u>chɔt</u>	taŋ kùn <u>rɔ̀t</u> **pɒəʔ**	pray lon ʔachat	təṅ gun rat pi
အဲလော့ဝ်တဲ့အ်	ဗွဲကြ်ဒမို့	ʔuə *lə*ŋ<u>ɔ̀</u> toə <u>ʔao</u>	pùə <u>krao</u> təm**lìʔ**	ʔay lṅow tuy ʔau	bway krau damli
ဖျုင်စေတ္ဘာမွဲ	ဗွဲဒးရုစိ၊	phyɤŋ ce*tə*na <u>mùə</u>	<u>ɓ</u>ùə tɛ̀hrɛ̀h **ciʔ**	phyuṅ cetnā mway	bway daḥraḥ ci
အဲပြေင်လဝ်ဩ်	သီရိဝါကျ	ʔuə priəŋ lɔ̀ *hə***<u>ɲ</u>ì?**	sɒə<u>rɒə</u>ʔ wɛ̀ə**kyaʔ**	ʔay preṅ law gñi	sīri wākya
တိုင်လင်ကာဗဲ့	ဗွဲလွေင်ဆန္ဒ	taŋ lɛ̀ŋka <u>plɔ̀ə</u>	<u>ɓ</u>ùə *lə*mìəŋ chɔn**tɛ̀ʔ**	təṅ laṅkā blay	bway lmeṅ chanda
ဟ့ိုလဝ်လိက်မွဲ	ပွဲရုမည	hɒm lɔ̀ lòc <u>mùə</u>	*pə*<u>ɗ</u>ɔə rɛ̀h mòn**ɲɛ̀ʔ**	həṁ law lik mway	pḍay raḥ maña
ပွဲရုဟံသာ	ပြာကတ်ဂတ။	*pə*ɗɔə rɛ̀h hɔŋ<u>sa</u>	<u>pra</u>kɔt hə**taʔ**	pḍay raḥ haṁsā	prākat gata

In the first three stanzas all lines end in the rhyme spelt ‹ət›,[1] but pronounced *ɒt* in the light register (after originally unvoiced initial) and *ɔ̀t* in the heavy register (after originally voiced initial). This rhyme is taken up again in the first half-line of stanza 4, which changes its end-rhymes to ‹i›, pronounced either *iʔ* or *ɒəʔ* in the light and *ìʔ* in the heavy register. In stanza 5 the rhyme is changed to ‹a›, pronounced *aʔ* or *èʔ* according to the register of the syllable. This discrepancy between orthography and pronunciation can lead to verses with no obvious rhyme pattern in the spoken language, as can be seen in the first two lines of stanza 5 above, where not a single rhyme pair is audible: *ìʔ-ɒəʔ* and *ɔ̀ə-ùə* as internal rhymes and *aʔ-èʔ* as line-end rhyme.

The same verse pattern is found in many pieces of Mon literature, mainly folk tales and legends. It differs from the common poetic system of prayers and religious songs, which are usually composed in stanzas consisting of four lines of twelve syllables each, arranged in three groups of four syllables (Vedañāṇa, 1997). Although Southeast Asian tradition traces back its poetry to Indian sources, Mon poetry (as well as much of Thai and Burmese poetry) is very different from the systems found in Pali and Sanskrit. Chit Bhumisak (2004) was probably one of the first Thai scholars to address this issue in Thai literature. Probably Mon and other Southeast Asian poetries are better seen as a continuation of pre-Indian indigenous poetry, which may later have been influenced in part by more recent imports from India.

Conclusion

Mon literature is an integral part of Southeast Asian literature as a whole. It shares common traits with Burmese and Thai literatures but still retains its independence from both. The text presented in this paper is not unique to Mon, its plot being shared with Thai and Lao literature. It is not easy, perhaps impossible, to tell who borrowed from whom. Probably the story goes back to an old folktale that has been variously adapted by different traditions at different times. As the Mon people almost certainly were an important part of the population of Central Thailand during much of the Ayutthaya period, it is very probable that much of the traditions shared by Thai and Mon were developed in a common environment. The Lao being culturally and linguistically very close to the Thai, common developments are ubiquitous not only in the field of literature. Multilingualism was probably much more widespread in pre-colonial times than it is today, and the societies were much more multiracial. In this social context the transmission of folktales from one people to another can occur much more easily than in today's centralized nation states with fixed political (and cultural) borders.

---

[1] Traditional (Western) descriptions of Mon use the digraph <ui> for the central vowel, as the Mon sign is made up of these two elements. As the combination presents a simple vowel rather than a diphthong, the transliteration as <ə> is preferred here (cf. also the traditional transliteration of e + ā as <o>).

With Mon literacy decreasing during the last two or three hundred years in both Burma and Thailand, much of the old literature has become obsolete or forgotten. Thousands of Mon manuscripts in Thailand have been catalogued, but no attempt at publishing or translating them has been made so far for various reasons. In Burma the tradition is mainly kept alive in Buddhist monasteries, where Mon manuscripts are kept and published as pocket books. A new increase in literacy among Mon in Burma in recent years has led to an increase in the publication of pieces of Mon literature.

Although the story of Saṅgadā is believed to be a historical text, it certainly does not qualify as history. Its value lies in the folkloric and mythological contents of the plot as well as in the archaic beauty of its language. The verses as they appear today may not be the original version, and some parts of the poem are incomplete with lines or syllables missing. This is not unexpected in a piece of literature that has been handed down over generations and copied and re-copied countless times. Maybe there are better preserved versions hidden in the library of some monastery in Burma or Thailand, among the many unexplored Mon palm-leaf manuscripts, and these may some day be used to achieve a complete version of the text.

As there is hardly any literature available on Mon poetry (and Mon literature in general), much more research has to be done in this field. The thoughts presented in this paper can therefore be considered preliminary results at most. It is hoped that more scholars of related fields, both local and international, will take an interest in the almost forgotten literature of the Mon people and give it the place it deserves in the Southeast Asian cultural picture.

References

Aung-Thwin, Michael A. 1998. *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Banti, Giorgio and Francesco Giannattasio. 2004. "Poetry." In Alessandro Duranti, ed., *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 290–320.

Bhumisak, Chit. 2004. *ʔooŋkaan chéŋ náam lɛ́ʔ khɔ̂ɔ khít mày nay prəwàtsàat thay lûm náam câaw phrəyaa* (The curse on the water of allegiance and new thoughts on the history of the Thai in the Chao Phraya basin). Bangkok: Fah Diao Kan.

Chongrian, Man. (Undated). *Săŋ Sĭnchay chəbàp nák-suk̀săa* (Sangsinchay students' edition). Bangkok:Phithak-aksorn.

Diffloth, Gérard. 1984. *Dvaravati Old Mon language and Nyah Kur.* Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University.

Jenny, Mathias. 2005. *T he Verb System of Mon.* Zurich: ASAS 19.

Kalyāṇa, Nai, ed. 1999. *kon smoŋ sɛŋhətɛ̀ə* (Prince Saṅgadā). Pha'auk: New

Monastery.

Ketprathum, Wichian. Undated. *lâw ruân̂ŋ saǐŋ sĭnchay* (Telling the story of Sangsinchay). Bangkok: Pattanasuksa Publishing.

Khurusapha. 1970. *Săngsĭnchai. klɔɔn sùət.* Vols. 1–2. Bangkok: Ongkankha khong Khurusapha.

Lieberman, Victor. 2003. *Strange Parallels. Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1800.* Cambridge: University Press.

Luce, G. H. 1985. *Phases of pre-Pagán Burma. Languages and History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mem Ong, Nai, ed. 1999. *wɔ̀tthuʔ sɛŋhətɛ̀ə* (The story of Saṅgadā). Sangkhlaburi: Mon Culture Committee.

Pālita, Nai**.** 1997. *wɛ̀ŋ thàt kyac ʔiʔspəʔ yɤ̀ (khet kəmpəʔ)* (New history of Kyaik Htiyo Pagoda). Kama Wak: New Monastery.

Phraphutthaloetlanabhalai, Phrabaat Somdej. 1997. *bòt ləkhɔɔn nɔ̂k phráʔ râatchəníʔphon* (Royal theatre compositions). Bangkok: Bannakharn.

Shorto, H. L. 1967. "The Devatau Sotāpan: A Mon Prototype of the 37 Nats." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* pp. 127–40.

Shorto, H. L. 1962. *A Dictionary of Modern Spoken Mon.* London: Oxford University Press.

Shorto, H. L. 1971. *A Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions from the Sixth to the Seventeenth Centuries.* London: Oxford University Press.

Vedañāṇa, Acā**.** 1997. *cemɔ̀n lòc mɔ̀n kərem-kərɔh kom-kaoʔ kəpyɛ̀ʔ ʔəlɛŋka mɔ̀n hələ̀ŋ.* (Mon poetry). Sangkhlaburi: Mon National Committee.

Wongthes, Sujit. 2003. *nâak nay prəwàtsàat ʔùʔsăakhənee* (Nāga in the history of Southesat Asia). Bangkok: Silapa Watthanatham/Matichon.

Yanson, Rudolf A. 2006. "Notes on the Evolution of the Burmese Phonological System." In Christopher I. Beckwith, *Medieval Tibeto-Burman languages II,* Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 103–20.